

CURTIS W. SABROSKY (1910–1997)

The distinguished American entomologist Curtis Sabrosky died suddenly on 5th October 1997 after a long career devoted in almost equal measure to his research interests as a dipterist and to the cause of zoological nomenclature. He was 87. His vitality was legendary, and to the end he left many a younger man exhausted by his boundless energy and his undimmed enthusiasm for his many interests. He travelled very widely, and his death occurred in Helsinki following a visit to Russia.

Of his service to the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature it is fair to say that nobody in recent times gave more wholeheartedly. He became a Commissioner in 1963, serving 22 years in this capacity and as President from 1977 to 1983. He was a member of the Editorial Committee responsible for the first modern (1961) edition of the Code, and Norman Stoll's Introduction pays tribute to his leadership, energy and skill. He was similarly prominent in the preparation of the 1985 edition, and made detailed and constructive contributions to the Commission's discussions at its 1996 meeting in Budapest on the new edition shortly to be published.

It cannot be said that Sabrosky's early relations with the Commission were always harmonious and there was some rough water to cross. In particular, his relationship with Francis Hemming was frosty almost from the time when Hemming became Secretary of the Commission in 1936. As Richard Melville, who took over from Hemming in 1958, wrote many years later, one of the ill effects of this was to make it effectively impossible for Curtis Sabrosky to join the Commission until Hemming had retired. Melville himself was at first wary of Curtis; opposite views were often forcefully exchanged by the two men, but they always greatly respected each other's experience and clarity of thought. They became close personal friends and a team that was of lasting benefit to the Commission and to nomenclature.

Curtis Williams Sabrosky was born in Sturgis, Michigan, on 3rd April 1910 and raised in the American mid-west. After graduating at Kalamazoo College and taking an M.S. degree at Kansas State University, he taught entomology from 1936 to 1944 at Michigan State University. It was at this time that his close interest in the Diptera began and, after a short wartime spell attached to the U.S. Public Health Service, he took a position as a dipterist at the Systematic Entomology Laboratory of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, housed in the National Museum in Washington. On retirement from U.S.D.A. in 1980 he received its Distinguished Service Award.

Curtis's taxonomic output on Diptera was prodigious. His main research interest focused on the Chloropidae, a family of small acalyptrate flies, but he published on many other families and his bibliography runs to some 400 entries. It is not only the Commission that will recall Sabrosky's massive contribution: he served as President of several zoological and entomological societies and was for 20 years on the Permanent Committee of the International Congress of Entomology.

Retirement — so-called — enabled him to complete some long-envisaged major undertakings, such as a fine book on the cuterebrid myiasis-producing flies and a stupendous work on the family-group names in Diptera. On this last project he had worked for over half a century and the text was complete at the time of his death; sadly, he did not live to see the volume in print.

Though an entomological workaholic, Curtis was a convivial man who lived life to the full. He was an expert ballroom dancer, a talent maintained to the very end of his life, and for many years he and his wife Laurel (she died in 1988) had a weekly fixture with friends at their local 10-pin bowling alley. He had an extraordinary memory which served him (and his friends) well for he always had a good new joke to tell, and when it came to zoological nomenclature he seemed able to recall every precedent or parallel — whether from entomology, general zoology, palaeontology, even botany. He was a stimulating man, sometimes stubborn, who won the deep and lasting affection of his many friends.

This note has been compiled with the help of Dr. R.W. Crosskey.